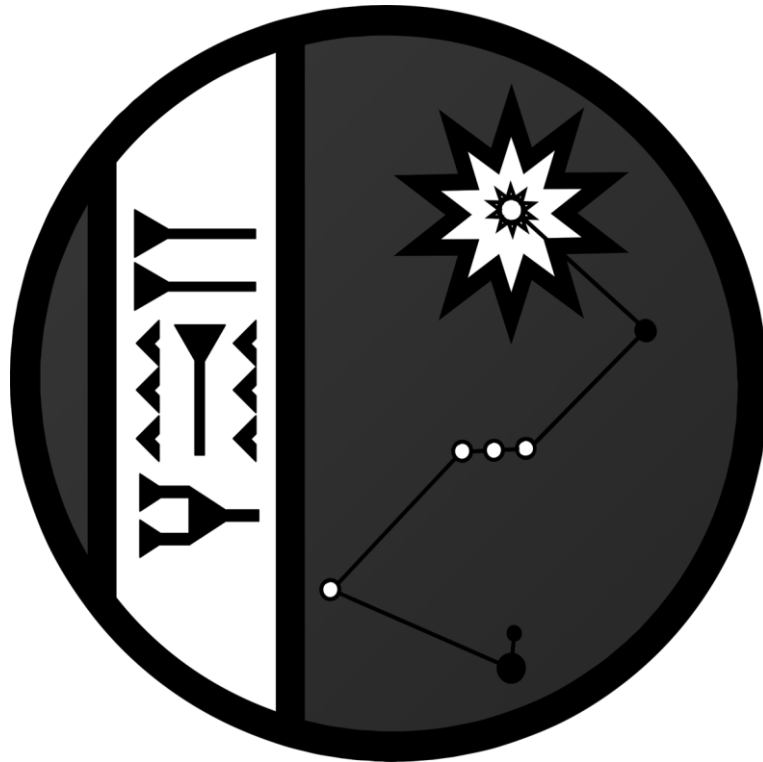


NO RILSKH INCIDENT



CULT OF PAPSUKKAL



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To Erin and her siblings.

1

- 69 20 88 13 -

- What does it say, Dr. Alset?

- Just a second, Linus, I'm almost done with it.

Even when the key to understand cuneiform script¹ had been obtained and academically approved in 1851, about thirty years before, Dr. Alset had kept in secret his advances about the knowledge of Akkadian² and Ugaritic³.

Taking the next clay tablet, he felt its texture - as he had done with the rest of them – and took a deep breath. The smell of wood and old paper from the desk and Linus Aminev's office itself, stimulated his senses back again.

The oil from the lamp had been replaced four times that day, since he was in need of more light than usual. His eyes were dry and tired, but he couldn't stop translating, his curiosity and will were stronger than his exhaustion.

The academic societies were mistaken. The Babylonians were far more than intelligent.

It was a symbol, a single symbol, key to the language itself, that when interpreted in the correct way, produced a chain reaction over the rest of the text, revealing the hidden message lying under the obvious interpretation.

¹ Writing system used in the Middle East around 2.600 B.C., normally recorded in clay, stone or metal tablets.

² Extinct language spoken by Assyrians and Babylonians around 2.800 B.C.

³ Extinct Canaanite language

Dr. Alset rested his quill and glasses over the refined wooden desk.

- It can't be true...

- So, is it ready, Doctor? – Linus insisted.

- Oh, you bet it is...

- What is it, then? What did the clay tablets reveal?

Dr. Alset took Linus out of the scenario of his mind, and began to talk to himself, thinking out loud.

- Today we fight each other with iron and powder, we think it's revolutionary to use electricity and coal...

Linus stood in silence in the middle of the room. He didn't seem to care that the Doctor was talking to himself.

- But it seems impossible that in a hundred years... – the Doctor continued - ... we will be ready to receive what we are supposed to receive according to this prophecy.

Linus appeared back again in his mind scenario.

- Dr. Alset, curiosity consumes me... What is it that we are to receive?

- First *who*, then *what*.

- Who? Does it talk about somebody?

- More than somebody, *something*. The record points to a character called Papsukkal.

- I have a slight idea, but I would be grateful if you fill me up with the details.

- Papsukkal was a Babylonian god which officiated as the link between the gods and the human race, "*Papsukkal the messenger*" – Dr. Alset said, looking at him over his glasses.

- Are we talking about religion or science in this case? I believed the Babylonian texts were literal. At least these ones.

The Doctor took another careful look at the tablets, and then lifted his eyes to Linus, who anxiously continued asking him questions.

- So, what is it? If it is not a spiritual manifestation, like an angel or such... what is it?

- I would dare say – the Doctor replied, after taking a deep breath – that it refers to a messenger from outer space.

Linus burst out in laughter.

- You have been reading Jules Verne for too long, Alset!

- I wouldn't mock at this – he said, lifting a piece of paper in the air.

- What is that?

Unrolling the paper gradually, stylishly drawn in ink, Alset revealed a strange pictogram.

- This, my friend Linus – Alset began, putting his glasses back in place – is a star chart, a navigation map.

- A map? A map to where?!

- A map to Papsukkal's location.

- Quit joking Alset. Are you saying that a Babylonian god has a body and a planetary location?

- Yes, precisely.

- Enough, Doctor! That is absolutely ridiculous! Are you trying to have us look like fools?

Alset ignored Linus's declarations, to continue with his speech. His fascination for the discovery went beyond any obstacle that might step in his way.

- It sounds ridiculous as out of context, but the tablets also reveal how to develop the technology to reach Papsukkal's location. Not his planetary location, but his location here, on planet Earth.

Linus was now speechless. He took seat to keep listening to his partner.

- Here on Earth? How? Will Papsukkal come here?

- Exactly, the texts refer to Papsukkal's "*landing*" on Earth.

- Then it is effectively an entity from outer space!
- So it is. Regrettably, it is impossible for us to reproduce such apparatus, the technology described in the tablets is too advanced for our time, yet possible in the future.
- Yet possible?! Isn't there a way to do it now? Let's see, as far as I understand, the Babylonians were able to develop this technology, but we can't do it now... right?
- Not now, but certainly in the near future – Alset cleared up.
- How near?
- Based on my calculations using the Babylonian calendar, they speak of an approximate year, after year 2000 of our calendar.
- That would be in almost 150 years! We'll be dead by then.
- It depends.
- Enlighten me, Alset – Linus said settling in his armchair – today I feel more ignorant than ever.
- The tablets describe a sort of device for space trips, that would make possible to... how could I put it into words... – Alset rubbed his forehead, looking for the right term - ... let's say, freeze you.
- Freeze me? You have lost it completely, Alset.

- Actually not freeze you, but the machine we're talking about would supposedly suspend all your vital signs, as if you were embalmed.
- How many years would it take us to build such machine?
- Gathering the raw materials, maybe eight. Building it, two.
- I would be in my forties.
- And I'll be dead just a few years later, my friend.
- I'm sorry, Doctor. If somebody deserves to gather the fruits of this labor, that person is you.
- Live the legacy, my friend Linus. Remember it is your fortune the one which has given life to this dream.

Linus turned his back to the Doctor to hide his tears, touched by his words. Even when Dr. Alset had been his employee, they had worked shoulder to shoulder in the digging, extraction, and conservation processes in the Middle East. The brotherhood link was undeniable.

- Does it say where it will happen, I mean, the place where Papsukkal will land?
- Actually, throughout the text there is a pattern that repeats the following group of numbers and 3 letters: 69 20 88 13 N S K.
- And that would be? That's too vague, I don't think it is something related to the location.

Linus leaned against a huge globe, one of his last acquisitions, and spun it while he awaited the Doctor's answer.

- Actually – Alset stood by it and stopped its rotation – last year, in the International Meridian Conference⁴, a new system of geographical location was accepted, and using these numbers with this system, we get this location.

Alset slowly rotated the globe, and stopped it with his index finger in the North of Asia.

- That location is part of the Russian Empire, and there is nothing but frozen lands there!

- Maybe there isn't anything *now*, but maybe there will in 150 years.

- Why would Papsukkal go there? Why not New York, Paris or London?

- We don't know, but the translation gives details on two subjects: first, Papsukkal's mission is to place technology and knowledge in our hands, which would start a new era of humanity beyond our imagination.

- Amazing... And secondly?

- The blueprints and specific information to construct a suit to reach the location, and be in the presence of Papsukkal.

- Like some sort of weather resistant armour?

⁴ Conference held in 1884, to determine a prime meridian (Greenwich) for international use.

- More than that, a mechanical suit with consciousness of its own.
- What?! A living suit sounds too far fetched, even more than the rest of the madness we have been talking about for more than one hour.
- Don't ask how, but here it explains that the suit can think by itself, show pictures, geographical location, and some other very interesting features.
- Good heavens – Linus started to walk in circles around Dr. Alset's desk – we have unlocked a window to the future investigating the past.
- More than that, we have unlocked the future of the future.
- Let's do this, Alset. I commend you the task to find shareholders, teach this knowledge, and in due time, awaken me... I am to meet Papsukkal.

A red, semitransparent sign, appeared in the scene:
INDUCTION PROCESS COMPLETE.

Maia opened her eyes. She felt slightly dizzy, a common side effect of using the machine, but she would soon get back to normality. Removing the alpha wave tiara, she straightened her posture and stepped off the Inductress.

A man with a silver coloured suit began to disconnect the rest of the cables off her body. She was one of the four who had been chosen.

- How are you feeling? Are you ready?

- Definitely, I cannot wait to see Linus alive back again. This will be a glorious experience.

The man turned to the congregation, of approximately 300 people.

- Fellow worshippers, it is time for the awakening!

A solemn silence filled the room.

On a higher level, a structure similar to an altar, hosted a beautifully engraved capsule, where Linus had been in cryogenic state for more than 150 years.

The man advanced towards it and pressed a button. The tubes from the capsule began to drain a saline solution, until it was completely empty. The door unlocked itself and decompressed. Everybody stood up, in anxiety.

The door opened as Linus walked out of it. The device on his wrist displayed the number 2014. Getting close to him, fearful, the man covered Linus with a robe to dry him.

Linus gave a few steps forwards, and lifting his hand, he spoke.

- My dear followers, friends in this unbelievable crusade, let's meet with Papsukkal, the Messenger from the skies!

- Long live Linus! Long live Papsukkal! – the congregation replied in unison.

- In a few, short years, we will look up to the sky, and receive him!

- Long live Linus! Long live Papsukkal!

2

- THROUGH THE MARSHES -

“Lord of the Boundary-Arrow, who establishes the limits, Panigara, En-ilsk call your name, Papsukkal, the marshes are in front. Surpassing are your names among the gods by far, you are thoughtful, capable, awesome.” – Myth of Anzu⁵, Alset translation.

The wind blew strongly, whistling as it hit the air intakes of the Asag suits.

The suits, warm enough inside to carry their hosts with comfort through the harsh weather, and hot enough on the outside to melt the snow and ice and grant a safe passage, produced a constant mist around them.

The obvious technological gap Linus had to struggle with, was swiftly filled by his incredible skill to absorb the knowledge and handle the equipment.

It was as if his mind had already been prepared for it, and he was simply born out of place in time.

- This is just as the texts predicted, Linus – Lockson said.

- Yes, it’s unbelievable. I wish Dr. Alset was alive to see this.

- It seems as taken out of a science fiction movie... sorry if some of our comments seem inappropriate or uncomfortable to you sir – Tarus clarified.

⁵ The Myth of Anzu is a Babylonian mythological text contained in three clay tablets. Details related to the myth are yet unknown.

- I don't know what you mean by science fiction, nor movie, I'm not familiar with those concepts, but this, more than anything else, is a holy crusade.

- Effectively – Maia added – as our creed says: “*Guardians and executors of the superior knowledge*”.

- Exactly. I have been waiting for more than 150 years to see this moment, I knew the time would come when we were to meet Papsukkal.

They all made silence for a few minutes. As they moved towards the city of Norilsk through the marshes, their welcome symphony was the melting snow, the cracking ice and the whistling wind.

- Now, I wonder – Tarus broke the silence – what the texts meant when they said we were to cross through fire to meet with Papsukkal, since this place is absolutely the opposite.

- Well, the interpretation could be metaphorical.

- Yes, it could be, or maybe we are the ones to bring fire to this place – Anya said, lifting her pulse rifle in the air.

Anya was the youngest of the group. Her father, Boris Yaversky, a powerful Ukrainian businessman, was the fourth of his generation to financially support the Cult of Papsukkal.

When he was around thirty years old, the Cult knew that the time for the coming of Papsukkal was soon to come, since the development and deployment of all the equipment detailed in the tablets was almost finished, but they estimated that the final, functional models, of both the

suits and weapons, were to be ready in approximately twenty years from then.

Anya was consequently trained, day by day since her childhood, to be one of the five chosen who were to receive Papsukkal, their so long awaited Messenger from the skies. Her knowledge relative to the texts and technology, plus the intensive military training she had to go through, was taken in high esteem by the members of the Cult.

- It was yesterday, when Dr. Alset pointed at this place, and there was absolutely nothing here – Linus said to himself, while he observed the silhouette of the city in the horizon.

- There is nothing there now either. All the inhabitants were annihilated in Papsukkal's landing. The heretics who have not prepared themselves, are not to survive in holy land.

- We have been waiting for almost a year to enter the city, just as the texts indicated – Lockson explained.

Linus interrupted the chatter lifting his fist in the air. The hydraulic sound of the suit filled the air, disturbing the peace that reigned.

Taking a look forward, he pointed at a small wooden cabin, approximately 500 yards in front of them.

- Sir, my suit is notifying me that a storm is heading towards us from the Northeast, maybe we should shelter ourselves there to prevent the suits to get damaged – Tarus suggested.

- The suits are made to resist all the obstacles we are to find – Anya replied, firmly.

- Beyond that, I don't think there's any harm in that. Are any of you tired? – Linus asked.

- Not at all – Maia confirmed – the suit does all the heavy work.

- Wait! – Lockson interrupted – I'm analyzing the map which the drones created for us, and the cabin was not there!

- How can it be? – Linus was confused – Did we miss something in the texts?

- Or it's work of the heretics. Project the map – Maia required.

A small, red light, turned on Lockson's suit, which projected a tridimensional reconstruction of everything within the limits of what the texts delimited as holy land. Using his thoughts, Lockson rotated the map, until it showed the area where they were at the moment.

- It wasn't there, let's sweep those heretics – Anya said.

- Wait, - Linus indicated – power used with wisdom is true wisdom and true power, let us proceed carefully. We'll approach the cabin with three of us in defensive mode, and two in attack mode.

- Right away! – they replied, in unison.

Tarus's, Lockson's and Maia's suits deployed frontal and back metallic curved plates, while a bubble of energy covered their heads, as Linus's and Anya's suits increased the

height of their legs, enough to shoot over the head of their defenders.

The human metal shield advanced towards the suspicious wooden construction.

The wind suddenly stopped blowing, as if they had found shelter behind an invisible wall, and the only sound which took over the place, was the soft humming of the suits.

- I have a bad hunch about this – Maia said.

- Me too, my suit is detecting high temperatures on the ground – Tarus added – the ground is hot, but it doesn't emanate steam.

- I'll clear the cabin out – Anya said, breaking the advance formation.

- Go ahead – Linus confirmed.

Anya's suit readjusted to its normal height, as she moved forward with her pulse rifle, ready to face her enemy. As she got to the door, she gave the warning signal, and asked for cover in case the enemy counterattacked.

She was used to the drills and exercises, but the real deal was unavoidably different. Even though she felt safe within the Asag⁶ suit, something still reminded her of her mortality. It was not lack of faith, it was survival instinct.

Stretching her arm to reach the door handle, Anya spoke through the communications channel.

- I'm going in.

⁶ In the Lugal-e poem of Sumerian mythology, Asag is a demon so terrible that his sole presence made fish boil alive in rivers.

- Understood.

A drop of sweat rolled from her forehead to her lip. She closed her hand to twist the handle, but was paralyzed as she realized that her fist had closed completely.

- Anya, what's going on? – Tarus inquired.

Her brain had finally processed the situation. She extended her arm to reach the door, but instead of making physical contact, she went through it as it disappeared before her eyes.

- Illusion – she whispered.

- What is that under her?! – Lockson exclaimed.

- It looks as if the snow is boiling around her!

- It's an illu...

Before Anya could finish her warning message, a fireball formed around her, wrapping her body and exploding.

Flying through the air towards where the group was – still holding defensive positions – she was followed by a trail of black smoke.

Her body impacted against Lockson and Tarus, who fell to the ground with her.

- Sister Anya! – Maia cried – Are you all right?!

As she turned around, a group of animals similar to dogs but covered with scales, shot a rain of spikes of almost half a metre long, coming out of their backs towards their position, which impacted in their frontal plates.

Most of them bounced away, leaving just a few embedded in their shields, just to be broken by Maia's arm as she strongly passed it through them.

- What are those?! Counterattack! – Tarus shouted, getting back to his feet and shooting his heavy machine gun.

- Basilisks! – Linus recognized – I have seen them in the facsimiles, but I never thought they could be real!

Anya stood up violently.

- Anya, are you ok?!

- You'll pay for what you've done, filthy creatures! – she screamed furiously, while she shot at them with her pulse rifle.

Her suit was still emanating black smoke.

The amount of creatures got quickly reduced, as the bursts from the plasma rifle carbonized them or set their scaly bodies on fire.

Another group engaged them from the back, as the ethereal cabin began to vanish in the air. Anya's rifle smoked in her hands and stopped working, overheated.

Before she could use her secondary weapon, a massive energy explosion from Maia's Shamash⁷ Cannon lifted a wall

⁷ Sun god, executor of justice and protector of the travellers.

of snow and water, making impact in the middle of the attacking group.

As the wind began to blow again, the combat stage began to clear up. The dust and ashes dissipated to reveal, again, the plainness of the marshes, scarred after the battle.

Everybody's heavy breathing could be heard through the intercommunicators. The fog became thicker, since the suits elevated their temperature due to the violent use of them.

- That was intense – Tarus said.

- That was predicted – Linus added – remember the words on the third tablet of the Myth of Anzu:

“Devastation... a heatwave blazed bringing confusion, a tempest to the four winds. The weapons slew the fiercest gallu-demons, though tireless, feared their attack under the protection of the frost. Both were bathed in the sweat of battle.”

- Fierce or not, we swept them – Maia said.

- Yes, that's exactly why these suits have been designed the way they are. As all this has already been predicted, the suits will protect us from all the hazards we might face on the way – Tarus assured.

- That's true, but don't give things for granted, we can still get killed – Linus corrected.

Anya walked towards where the cabin was, while she listened to the conversation on the intercommunicator. As

the team turned to her, she kneeled down to pick something from the floor.

- Interesting – Anya’s voice sounded on their suits.

She analyzed the object, rotating it with the tip of her suit’s fingers: a small cube of metallic appearance.

- What is it, Anya? – Lockson inquired, as they got closer to her.

- A small cube, but it seems that one of its sides is somehow loose.

She pressed it, to return the side back to its place. As soon as she did so, a blue beam of light shot towards the sky, expanding and forming a cubical energy field around them. The snow from the storm, which had barely started, stuck to the semitransparent walls.

- It’s a shelter, protection.

- It’s a gift, from the heavens.

- Let us rest until the storm has passed, to optimize the energy consumption of our suits – Linus suggested.

They all obeyed the order, and the suits began to lean back. Extending the length of their legs, as they began to face the sky, a pair of supports came from out of their backs to give them balance for such position, and the hydraulic systems decompressed, leaving the suits in resting position.

Their first step towards their holy land had been taken, and if something had been set clear, was the fact that they were to prove their dignity and open their way to meet with the Messenger.

END OF SAMPLE